

# A Midnight QSO at Christmas

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## Chapter 1. NP1SC



“CQ CQ CQ CQ CQ de NP1SC NP1SC K”, came through the headphones strapped on the ears of Jack Armstrong as he squinched his eyes shut and strained to hear the signal that just barely rose above the noise floor of his receiver.

He adjusted the regeneration control to get as much gain as he could out of the Ocean Hopper before sending it screaming into oscillation when the signal, full of flutter and fading came back on the air on 3.723 Megacycles.

The band had quieted down long after sunset and Jack was fighting sleep as he tuned across the 80 Meter Novice band, looking for any stations he might still be able to call for a short contact.

It was late, much later than he normally stayed up during school days but it was Christmas vacation, and he was spending as much time as he could to work new states with the great band conditions on 80.

It was two days before Christmas and the snowfall from earlier that day had left the ramshackle house they lived in buried in several feet of snow - not unusual for the shoreline of Lake Michigan just north of Benton Harbor.

Lake-effect snow was the norm for this time of year as the Alberta Clippers raced down from Canada across Wisconsin and picked up moisture from the big lake, then dumped it on the near shore due to the weather phenomenon called “orographic lift”.

He had learned about that in Science Class at his junior high school during the late Fall and since the bluff above Lake Michigan rose 75 feet above the water it was all it took to create these whopping big snowstorms.

The heavy snow and ice on his Windom antenna strung between two tall pine trees in the backyard was bowing ominously and the feedline was hanging down with icicles where it bent upward in to his second-floor window.

The crack he left open was just enough to get the feedline under the window and into his balun coils mounted on the wall above his operating desk. The gap was still big enough to make him shiver when the wind blew through with diamond sparkles of frost and snow.

The lack of humidity with steam heat from the radiator meant there was little ice on the inside of the window in his bedroom - unlike the upstairs bathroom where the humidity from the shower and bath caused ice to form on the inside of the windowpanes.

Jack blew the diamonds away from his logbook and penciled in NP1SC as he tuned back and forth across the spot on his bandspread dial, desperate to copy the signal again.

“Ah, there he is again - just barely readable but still calling CQ”, Jack muttered as he threw the knife switch over to his transmitter and keyed the rig.

The RF ammeter read the usual current out of his 6L6 - the match on the antenna was still good despite the snow and ice, thanks to the L-C output network that his mentor, Charlie, had fine-tuned for him. All he had to do was tune the plate - the MOPA he had built with Charlie's help meant he could forego a tuned input, so he did not peak the grid - that would come later next year when he moved up to a DX-40.

And he lived far enough off the M-139 Highway north of Benton Harbor with few nearby neighbors that TVI wasn't a problem.

His 35 to 40 Watts of output was plenty of CW when conditions were right and on this night with the band lengthened out in late December it would be all he needed - as long as this NP1SC was tuning around, listening for a reply.

As near as he could tell, Jack thought he was about 10 Kc away from his frequency which was plenty close enough for making contacts in the Novice part of the 80 Meter band.

Jack quickly flipped through his index of radio call sign prefixes and nowhere to be found was an “NP”.

With such little experience in radio under his belt he never thought about the possibility of the signal as a pirate, playing a joke on unsuspecting Novices, but even if he had, he would have been wrong.

Jack listened to the third CQ end, then flipped the knife switch to transmit and began calling,

“NP1SC NP1SC NP1SC de WN8KEX WN8KEX WN8KEX K” and leaned into his headphones to see if the station heard him...

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## Chapter 2.      Regeneration



“WN8KEX WN8KEX de NP1SC RRR ES GE OM - UR RST RST IS 239 239 - QTH HR NP NP NP ES OP SC SC - HW CPI? AR WN8KEX de NP1SC KN”

Jack shook his head to clear it of the late-night fuzziness that plagued him as the muted ‘bongs’ struck midnight on the grandfather clock in the downstairs hallway. The one his grandfather had constructed in his workshop in the barn out back, which was now covered in snow and glistening in the moonlight as he looked out the window.

He threw the knife switch to transmit and began to send on his war surplus J-38, replying to the station that signed NP1SC and claimed to be located at NP, wherever that was.

He loved that hand key - the same type his late father had learned on in the early years of World War Two at the Navy radio school in San Diego before he shipped out to the South Pacific in early 1944. By June of that year Jack’s father would operate CW communications on a destroyer that would be part of a 450-ship fleet supporting the US Marine’s landing at Iwo Jima.

But now he could not find a radio prefix for NP.

He knew the common ones he heard on 80 Meters - the VE’s up in Canada, an XE down south of the border in Mexico and on occasion the CO2 down in Cuba with the chirpy signal and fast dits. And of course, all the W’s and K’s here in the United States.

But he had never heard of an NP - yet here he was, in contact with one named “SC”.

Strange name, too, Jack thought, although he had met a few older ham radio operators on the band who went by their initials.

Why, Charlie himself, his mentor into the mysteries of radio telegraphy, went by the shorthand moniker "CW". Charlie had been born in 1908 and worked on the railroad as a telegrapher since the late '20's signing with his first two initials as his personal call sign and carried the tradition on into his amateur radio operations.

Jack's Rand-McNally atlas book of maps and the radio prefix world map on his bedroom wall gave no clue as to where NP was so he dropped it and focused on his sending - his fist was improving by the week and he was able to send at 18 words per minute with good spacing when he was fresh - but "SC" had come back to him at a steady 10 WPM, so he kept to the same speed. It was a courtesy he was careful to keep and Charlie had made it a point to caution him to slow down and not overdo it, matching the speed of the other operator.

Jack had been using Morse code now as a Novice for 11 months and he secretly wanted a speed key for Christmas - he had his eye - no, his *heart* - set on a Vibroplex Original he saw in the QST advertisements. He had mentioned it once to Charlie a month ago and "CW" had told him to be patient and keep plugging along with his hand key.

Spending time on a straight key like the J-38 and perfecting his fist was the most important thing he could do, and being turned loose on a "bug", as they were called, might derail Jack from becoming an excellent telegrapher.

That was Charlie's wisdom and Jack tried to keep his impatience in check - but he really did want a bug of his own - he had seen a picture of the J-36 speed key his father had used in the Navy in an old photo album in a trunk in the drafty attic above him and he felt that having his own would tighten the bond between father and son, even if Tom Armstrong had been gone now for two years.

Jack checked the RF ammeter with the key down for a second, then began to send - maybe "SC" was a real OT, an old timer - his fist had seemed a little wobbly, anyway, so he kept it around 10 WPM,

"NP1SC de WN8KEX RRR ES TKS RPT FM NP - UR 339 339 339 IN BENTON HARBOR MI? BENTON HARBOR MI - NAME IS JACK JACK - PSE QSL OM - WHR IS NP QTH? BK TO U - AR NP1SC DE WN8KEX KN"

The reply came back - now very faint, fading in and out with a strange flutter that seemed to make the signal sound almost hollow as Jack adjusted the tuning and turned the regeneration control dangerously close to the dreaded squeal of oscillation to improve readability. He was becoming expert at extracting light signals by regeneration from the high gain and narrow bandwidth of the Ocean Hopper which required a deft touch to hear the weakest signals.

The 13-year-old had not yet mastered copying what he heard in his head without writing it all down - he still used paper and pencil, and as he wrote down the next message from "SC" he let out a startled gasp...

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## Chapter 3.      The North Pole



Jack looked down at his scribbles on the notebook page on his desk in wonder.

He used a combination of print and a script style of his own design which he thought made it easier to copy down the code than the system he had seen in the ARRL's little red booklet on learning the Morse code.

His way was far from the flowing script he had seen Charlie use, which he knew came from his mentor's early days on the Pere Marquette Railroad when Charlie was an operator at a small station in South Haven.

What he had written was,

"WN8KEX de NP1SC RRR - FB JACK ES TKS RPT FM BH - WL QSL SURE - QTH HR IS NP NORTH POLE  
NORTH POLE - NW QRU - CU SN 73 SK WN8KEX de NP1SC KN"

Jack threw the knife switch again and sent his reply to "SC" and signed off for the night, giving the customary "*dit dit*" before he threw the switch back to receive, pondering what he had just heard.

Sure, the signal he copied was real enough, albeit weak and fluttery unlike any other signal he could recall copying, and he certainly was not dreaming - gusts of cold air were coming through

the slit in the window and snow was piling up in a miniature drift on the outside of the windowsill, dribbling into his bedroom, spilling down on to the radiator and giving off a soft hiss. The chill kept him wide awake even though it was past midnight, early in the morning of Christmas Eve.

Mulling over the entire QSO and beginning to wonder who this “SC” really was, Jack began to yawn and stretch. The North Pole? Were there really ham radio operators up there? He knew about the ham station down in Antarctica but that was a world apart.

He tuned across the band and although the noise level had dropped to nearly zero, he heard not a single signal - humble though the Ocean Hopper was, compared to the expensive superhets he drooled over in the QST advertisements, it had plenty of gain and sensitivity common to all the old regenerative receivers.

He heard no one on the 80 Meter Novice band and turned his rig off.

As he reached up to turn off the desk lamp his gaze fell on the photo on the desk of his father and the old Stearman biplane they had back in the barn. The three of them - Grandpa Fred, Tom and little Jack all stood together along the lower wing, smiling in the sunshine with the airplane parked at the head of their farm’s airstrip.

Every time he looked at that photo it brought a lump to his throat.

The old Stearman had been used for years as a crop duster for the Concord grape vines they farmed on their acreage - the grapes at harvest were sold to Welch’s and Smucker’s for their jams and jellies along with every other fruit grower in the rich farmland of western Michigan.

The family had made a decent living out of a lot of hard work until the crash wrecked the Stearman and cost Tom his life - bird strikes near power lines were the nemesis of crop dusters and a flock of geese out of nowhere brought the big aircraft down hard. Flying six feet over the vines to dust them was dangerous work and Jack’s father had been a careful and safe pilot until the unavoidable accident took his life.

Now Grandpa Fred lived with Jack and his mother and tried to manage the vines, but without Tom it was a losing proposition, with two poor seasons in a row the farm was beginning to show the signs of a slow death - bankruptcy was on the horizon and finances were tight in the family. Pennies were being pinched.

Jack grit his teeth and held back tears as he clicked off the light and got ready for bed.

Pushing memories of his father out of mind, his last thoughts as he drifted off into a deep sleep were of Christmas Eve and the strange radio contact he had with “SC” ...

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# **A Midnight QSO at Christmas**

## **Chapter 4. Christmas**

“Rise and shine, Jack - It’s daylight in the swamp!”, rang out as Grandpa Fred threw the bedroom door open and opened the window shade by the radio desk.

Jack rolled over and feigned sleep but couldn’t suppress a smile at hearing the early morning call that had woken him and his father up for two generations.

Fred Armstrong had served in World War One as a Signalman in the US Marines at Belleau Wood<sup>1</sup> and one of the more civilized phrases he picked up in The Old Breed was the morning wake-up call Jack had learned to love.

“The cows need milked, the stables need mucked and here you are, sacked out like we live in the city!”, came next and Jack struggled to sit up and look at the clock on his desk.

It was 10 AM and by now he knew Grandpa Fred had already taken care of the chores out in the barn and was letting Jack sleep in.

It was Christmas Eve and once the animals were fed the family would take the rest of the day off along with Christmas.

Fred had kindled an interest in telegraphy in Tom Armstrong leading to a stint as a Radioman in World War Two, which was then passed down to Jack and showed up in his amateur radio pursuit.

Fred privately hoped the boy might make a career in electronics and get out of the farm business - he had spent his life and his son’s life working the farm and it had come time to move on.

Jack spent the day with his mother and Fred and the two families down the road who also farmed their spreads. Talk revolved around the weather and the recent poor harvests and the price being paid for the grapes which seemed to decrease every year, despite the demand.

Jack was excused from the dinner table and after cards, eggnog and singing Christmas carols around the tree he escaped to his bedroom and turned on his rig.

Lots of signals on 80 Meters filled the Novice band and he passed along holiday greetings to everyone he worked as the clock ticked on.

Many of the hams he contacted were well known to him after nearly a year as a Novice and their QSL cards were tacked on the wall around the edge of the world prefix radio map above his desk.

Jack paid no attention to the time and was surprised when he heard the big clock downstairs sound the midnight hour.

By this time the band had lengthened out and there were few signals left and what he did hear was weak and hard to copy.

As he tuned across the band, he heard a heterodyne come on, key down for a few seconds, then silence.

He instantly recognized the peculiar nature of the signal - it was the same one he had heard last night from NP1SC.

Jack's senses were immediately heightened when he heard a faint, watery CW signal sending

"VVV VVV VVV TEST de NP1SC/AM NP1SC/AM K"

"Hmmm..." thought Jack, "That surely is "SC" again but he's signing his call with a slash AM, wonder what that means?"

He quickly flipped through the ARRL operating guide and found the answer - signing "/AM" meant the station was operating "Aeronautical Mobile".

"Wow!", came out of Jack's mouth as he carefully tuned in "SC"'s signal who again had the key down for a few seconds.

Then Jack heard a garbled voice speaking almost right on frequency, just detectable by the Ocean Hopper.

Jack had played with the radio enough to know that a regenerative receiver had the marvelous, nearly miraculous ability to copy AM, SSB and CW without a BFO by merely tuning the signal above or below zero beat and tweaking the regen control carefully.

As he did so, he distinctly heard a joyful voice calling out,

*"Ho Ho Ho, Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night!"*

Jack sat there, headphones on his head, stunned with his mouth open.

He tore out of the bedroom to his Grandpa's room and shook him until he woke up - groggy and grumpy.

"Grandpa, you won't believe what I just heard!", Jack whispered now that he had the old man's attention.



“OK, Jack, this better be good...”, grumbled Grandpa Fred as Jack told him what he had heard on the Ocean Hopper.

“Hmmm... well, Jack, that is some DX you heard there. Pretty rare, if I don’t say so myself. But until you get a QSL card from this “SC” character, I am skeptical.”

It was nearly 1 o’clock in the morning and the grandfather clock struck a single ‘bong’ downstairs when the two of them heard a distinctive “THUMP” on the roof of the old farmhouse.

“What in tarnation was that?!”, Grandpa thundered, now fully awake and irritated that he was up in the middle of the night, suffering from too much spiked eggnog after dinner.

Fred and Jack went down the stairs and looked out the windowpanes by the front door to see if anyone or thing was there. The Christmas lights Jack had made in shop class at school were still on around the door when something on the porch caught Jack’s eye.

“Grandpa, there’s a box on the front porch!”, cried Jack as Fred pulled open the heavy door with the stained-glass windows.

On the porch in front of them was a small box with red ribbons, a green bow and a small card.

Jack lifted the box - really heavy for such a small box - and read the card.

***“Merry Christmas - From SC to Jack, CU on the air!”***

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<sup>1</sup>Fred Armstrong served in the same Marine battalion with Mac McLoughlin at Belleau Wood, France in WWI. You can read more in “The Perkinsville Station”, which is Part Two of “The Telegrapher’s Trilogy”.

